

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 8.7.16

Scripture: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Luke 12:32-40

I was described as critical this week. It wasn't meant as a compliment. Actually, you might say it was meant as a criticism. The thing is, I decided to take it as a compliment, if paradoxically a critical one—because I think to be able to think through a thing, to weigh it for its significance, to suss out its aims and to measure its effects, and ultimately to deem its worthiness, either for me personally to be a part of or as a thing at all: I think this is all to the good. Not just to accept the received conclusion about any given thing, not just to accept any old thing on its own terms, but to try to *understand* it and to come to my own conclusion: I think this is to the good.

Don't we teach critical thinking in school as a good unto itself?

Don't we say something is "critical" if it's important, and someone is in "critical care" because we need a well-trained medical mind attending to this case all the time?

Wouldn't we say that God is himself quite critical, and that God is to be our guide?

"Hear the word of the Lord," Isaiah told the elite of Judah, the wealthy and powerful who'd abandoned the dictate that there be a social concern for the poor. "Hear the word of the Lord...! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? ...I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts.... Who asked this of your hand?"

The answer to this, of course, is that God did. The Lord had asked this of their hands. Right worship, appropriate sacrifice, burnt offerings and sin offerings to reestablish holiness in the land: these were all matters of the Law, of the Torah by which the people were gathered as a people, their constitution as it were by which they knew how to live. Rules for behavior; rules for inheritance and distribution of goods; rules for how to worship, and where and when and why: these had all been received and recorded as given by God through Moses to the people. So, the Lord had asked this of their hands—the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

For this reason, it's clear (and therefore should be said) that God didn't object to such forms of worship out of hand. Strange as these sacrificial practices are to people today, it'd be easy to conclude that such ritually rich worship is somehow less correct than, say, for example, our very stripped down service of three hymns, two scripture readings, and one loaf

of bread. (I, for one, am pleased that the body we'll together break won't leave blood on my hands.)

But I bet some congregations will hear as much this morning, that God objected to such ritual-heavy worship out of hand, that there's something especially corrupt about ritualism. Protestants, especially "low church" Protestants, love to point out how unencumbered their worship is (*our* worship is), as if to have such basic things as word and song and silence leaves fewer openings in worship for sin—for idolatry or waywardness.

But this would be wrong to suggest—and it would come dangerously close to Christian arrogance as regards Jewish tradition—for it wasn't the form that was crucial, but the result, the affect, of the service that really mattered, and still matters.

Really, any form of worship that satisfies itself with rites and rituals without some outward movement of social good: this isn't what will please the Lord. This is actually, apparently, something that would pain the Lord.

Thus said the Lord, and rather critically I might add, "I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moods and appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them." Really, instead of all this, simply, "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out..."

I have to say, I love that God isn't dispassionate or disinterested in his response to the people. I love that he doesn't just present his disappointment in some measured, reasonable way. "A jealous God," he's often even described himself through the prophets: a jealous God, which has always puzzled me because jealousy is something I've understood as negative. And there is that: it can be synonymous to envious or covetous, resentful or grudging. But it's also synonymous to protective and watchful, vigilant and mindful.

A jealous God: protective and watchful and vigilant.

I remember as a child, and more so as an adolescent: I remember knowing there were certain things that, if I were to do them, my parents would kill me. I'd say as much, too: "Want to go to that party?" "No, my parents would kill me." Want to break some other very clear rule? No, my parents would kill me. It was enormously comforting to me, that my parents would kill me. It made the world safer for me, and me more secure in it, knowing that my parents would so jealously guard and protect me. I hope it's also of comfort to my kids,

and I think this is what it means to have a jealous God in love with you; this is what it means to have a passionate God in love with us—that our suffering would be God’s suffering, that our betrayal and forgetfulness would be God’s pained loss, that our self-service over care for others in our midst would amount to a broken heart for God.

But if we begin this work of service for the sake of a common good out of some obligation to God, we can anticipate eventually embracing this work of service for the value it has come to have to us, for where our treasure there will our heart be also.

We sometimes hear this backwards—that where our heart is is where we’ll put our treasure, that we’ll give our money to that which we value. But, true that this might be, Jesus is saying here something else. He’s saying that where we put our treasure, be it our time or our money or our efforts, is the thing that will come to have captured our hearts, that we’ll give our heart to that which we’ve given our treasure. Things matter to us because they have mattered to us. Things are of value to us because we have invested value in them. We form sentimental attachments and even feelings far stronger to the things or projects or endeavors that have taken our time, talent, and treasure.

Could Farm matters to many of us because we have invested years and tears to that endeavor.

This congregation matters to many of us because we have worshipped here in its midst Sunday after Sunday for years, decades; and others like us have done so for centuries. We’ve given money to maintain the sanctuary and to sustain the ministries of this church, and in having done so we’ve grown to value this place.

I watch as people who’ve built up Volunteers in Medicine, the free healthcare clinic in Great Barrington; built it up from nothing over the twelve years since when they’d first imagined it. I watch them while, though none of them will ever need its services, all of them recommit themselves to it in part because already they’ve committed so much of themselves to it.

Your heart follows your investment. That’s what Jesus is saying: your heart follows your investment, so invest wisely, invest in things worthy of your heart. Examine a thing for its worthiness, critique it for its aim and eventual effect: invest wisely. Then watch as you come to love that into which you’ve invested.

You can choose something unworthy. (Remember Solomon last week?) You can choose something ill fitting for you personally. (I'm involved with a couple things I need to resign from. They just aren't for me.) Or you can choose something that would please not just you but also our very just God.

Watch as the service work that you first did perhaps out of obligation becomes one of your favorite things to do. Watch as you laugh with someone you're serving at the soup kitchen. Feel as you sit with someone suffering (perhaps like you) mental illness or grief: feel your heart strengthen with gratitude and awe. Notice as you work for justice—economic justice or racial justice or climate justice or “criminal” justice—that what was once an attempt at do-gooding because you sort of felt like you should has become the reason you look forward to the week ahead.

Did you know that, among people who study the precipitous decline in church participation in recent decades, there's a growing notion that the church is offering a solution to a problem no one feels any longer as problematic. Time was people were concerned with sin and salvation, and thus the church took up the task of preaching and teaching about sin and salvation. But now few are the people who are concerned with such things. Now, the primary problem of human existence is one of meaning and purpose amidst an epoch of disintegration and incoherence. The church, though, has been slow to hear the concerns of human being in this age. We continue to offer ways to become free of sin, ways to secure for yourself eternal life as if we've got nothing to offer as far as meaning and purpose go.

The thing is, though, that we *do*. We do have something to say as far as these modern and post-modern anxieties are concerned. Really, Jesus, to my hearing, spoke as much of how to live a life rich, filled with purpose, even urgent purpose, as he spoke of how to guarantee salvation in the afterlife—more so, perhaps. Certainly this is what I hear in this random set of sayings, which Luke collected here—how to live a life rich with meaning.

Keep awake! Keep watch! Be dressed for action and keep your lamp lit.

It'd be a mistake to try to make these several teachings hang together too neatly. But this they do have in common: a sense of urgency as regards the task at hand. We're to build up the kingdom. We're to get to work doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with our God. We're to get to work seeking justice, and rescuing the oppressed, and defending the orphan or the otherwise dispossessed, and pleading for the widow or the

otherwise bereft and all alone. This in-breaking is coming, and it will be that much more welcome if we start to learn its ways now, if we start to invest in its aims now. And our worship is to serve our preparing, our working, our building up of God's blessing now.

Take this bread, then, and be nourished for service. Drink of this cup and by its sweetness be quickened for the sweet work of love and justice. Receive as you need, serve as you can. The critical action of God in the world is necessary now as ever, and it's ours to join in the doing.

If you were looking for a reason to get out of bed tomorrow morning, think through this one. I always find it worth my while.

Thanks be to God.